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AUTHOR Feldman, Paula R.
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ABSTRACT

Biographical writing is highly imaginative writing and always has been. The task of the biographer is to weave a riveting story from the fabric of the subject's life. For example, a single pivotal incident in the lives of Percy Bysshe Shelley, the English poet, and Mary Godwin, author of "Frankenstein", at the grave of Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is given wildly disparate portrayals by both contemporary and current biographers. It is the use of fictional techniques that makes a biographical subject come alive in the mind of the reader. Biographical and autobiographical writing assignments can be designed to help students discover for themselves the subjectivity involved in writing for any particular audience and writing from any particular point of view. The teacher should encourage students to use the material of their own lives to discover how the telling of any good story, however factual, requires fictional techniques. For example, students are asked to write an account of their first date for three different audiences--their best friend, their mother, and their minister, scout leader or school principal. Or they may be asked to take out their checkbooks and imagine that in some future age they are their own biographers with only the factual information on the check stubs from which they must puzzle out and construct a life. Writing activities such as these help students better understand not only the impact of point of view and audience on writing but, where the story of a life is concerned, how much fiction is involved in both the living and the telling. (RAE)

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Paula R. Feldman
University of South Carolina

Creativity in Biographical Writing or the Necessary Fictions of Nonfiction

The greatest fiction about nonfiction is that it involves no fiction. Or, to put the myth another way, they say nonfiction writing is "non-creative" writing. The misconception, as it relates specifically to biographical nonfiction writing, derives in part from the notion that for a biography to be reliable, it must be purely factual. Thus, the thinking goes, all a good biographer need do is set down the facts. My first aim this afternoon is to convince you that this is not the case with biography and never has been.

To demonstrate, lets look at an incident, chosen almost at random, from the lives of Percy Bysshe Shelley, the English poet, and Mary Godwin, author of Frankenstein, who would in time become Mary Shelley. The undisputed facts are simply these: In June of 1814, Mary Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley first declared their love for one another in St. Pancras Churchyard, London, where Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of The Vindication of the Rights of Women was buried. Mary Shelley was at this time 16 and Percy Bysshe Shelley was married to Harriet Westbrook and was the father of a small child. These are the facts.

Let's look first at contemporary accounts. William Godwin, father of Mary Godwin, recounts the event this way:

> "On Sunday, June 26, he [Shelley] accompanied Mary and her sister, Jane Clairmont, to the tomb of Mary's mother, . . . and there, it seems, the impious idea first occurred to him of seducing her, playing the traitor to me, and deserting his wife."

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Harriet Westbrook Shelley, the deserted wife, tells a somewhat different story:

"Mary was determined to seduce him. She is to blame. She heated his imagination by talking of her mother, and going to her grave with him every day, till at last she told him she was dying in love for him, accompanied with the most violent gestures and vehement expostulations. He thought of me and my sufferings, and begged her to get the better of a passion as degrading to him as herself. She then told him that she would die--he had rejected her, and what appeared to her as the sublimest virtue was to him a crime."

Some years later, in 1859, Lady Shelley, formerly Jane St. John, the Shelleys' daughter-in-law, in the first authorized biographical account, portrayed the incident with considerably more sympathy for the lovers than either Harriet Shelley or William Godwin could muster:

"He [Shelley] was still extremely young. His anguish, his isolation, his difference from other men, his gifts of genius and eloquent enthusiasm, made a deep impression on Godwin's daughter Mary, now a girl of sixteen, who had been accustomed to hear Shelley spoken of as something rare and strange. To her, as they met one eventful day in St. Pancras Churchyard, by her mother's grave, Bysshe, in burning words, poured forth the tale of his wild past--how he had suffered, how he had been misled, and how, if supported by her love, he hoped in future years to enrol his name with the wise and good who had done battle for their fellow men, and been true through all adverse storms to the cause of humanity.

Unhesitatingly, she placed her hand in his, and linked her fortune with his own;"

Lady Shelley indicates here that nothing less than "the cause of humanity" was at stake in this liaison. She points to the lovers' youth to excuse any rashness and, in other passages, blames Harriet Shelley for having beeen a cold and unfaithful wife.

Now, you might well object, all three of these accounts were written by interested parties. What do we find when we look at later accounts written by professional biographers unrelated to the principals? Mrs. Shelley by Lucy Maddox Rossetti, was published in

1890, 68 years after Shelley's death and 39 years after Mary's.

Rossetti plays no favorites.

"So, . . . the march of fate continued, till . . . passion seemed to have subdued the power of will; and the obstacle now imposed by Godwin [his forbidding the lovers to see one another] only gave added impetus to the torrent, which nothing further could check. . . . We have seen enough to gather that . . . circumstances drew Shelley to Mary with equal force as her to him. The meetings by her mother's grave seemed to sanctify the love which should have been another's. They vaguely tried to justify themselves with crude principles. But self-deception could not endure much longer;"

Rossetti shows little sympathy here for either party and blames each of the lovers equally. But at about the same time, in 1886, Helen Moore published her book, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, which tells a rather different story.

"One eventful day in July, whether by chance or otherwise I know not, he [Shelley] found Mary Godwin . . . beside her mother's grave, in St. Pancras churchyard. There it was, in that solemn and earnest place, in the presence of all those ghostly dead, where all the idols and vanities of the world are laid low and only the truth remains, that Shelley poured out his soul to that woman: the story of his early life, his disappointments at school, his disagreements with his father, his unloved marriage, his aspirations, his hopes for the future, his love for her. And there it was, in that place where her restless heart had always come for sympathy and understanding, there under the guiding spirit of her mother, that Mary Godwin plighted her troth to Shelley."

How romantic. How inspiring. Notice, too, the many details that have been added about the nature of their conversation. In our own century, in 1918, Alexander Harvey devoted an entire book to the subject of Shelley's Elopement. An account of the incident under discussion here takes many pages, but the following extract is representative of his approach.

"Shelley!" cried Mary, looking straight into his eyes as she confronted him. "Have you ever given a thought to a woman's heart?"
He ceased chewing the raisin in his mouth.
"Have you not seen how my heart has responded to your appeal?" she asked him, her dark grey eyes flashing. "Shelley, I have grown to love you. The fault is yours."
For a full minute their eyes did not cease to pour themselves out,

the one pair into the other. Mary seemed to be waiting for a word from him. It remained unspoken.

"The fault is yours," she proceeded. "You have made me love you."

She looked at him for another moment. Then she covered her face with her hands. He seemed like a man in a trance. Mary sank upon her knees beside the grave of her mother.

"Ah! my dead mother," she cried, lifting her hand to the sky. "Wherever you be, you at least understand your child."

She bowed her head. He leaped across the grave. Mary could feel the tangled mass of the poet's hair as it brushed her cheek. In a trice he had put an arm around her waist. She yielded to its pressure with a sob. Her head sank upon his shoulder.

"My Mary!"

He murmured the words into her ear. She made no effort to disengage herself from his embrace. Beneath the tree that cast its shade upon them and across the grave of Mary Wollstonecraft they exchanged the kiss that ranked them with Heloise and Abelard, with Paolo and Francesca, among love's immortals."

A decade later, in 1928, Richard Church published his biography of Mary Shelley in which he was considerably more reticent about what a biographer could properly infer about the conversation.

"For a time Godwin and his wife suspected nothing of the volcano that was rumbling beneath them. By July, however, the two lovers had come to an understanding.

They confessed their tragic love for each other over her mother's grave in St. Pancras Churchyard, where she was accustomed to go to spend her most sacred moments of solitude and to escape from home-life. Mary Wollstonecraft was a deity to both the young idealists, and gave their attraction a triple strength. Mary used to take her favourite books and read, as it were, under her mother's supervision.

Shelley followed her one day, and what was said between them no third person dare try to imagine."

Andre Maurois, on the other hand, in his 1924 book Ariel: The Life of Shelley, is not only knowledgeable about the conversation but clairvoyant showing a remarkable ability to read the lovers' minds:

"The only place in the world where she felt herself at peace was by her mother's tomb in the churchyard of old St. Pancras. She went there book in hand every fine day to read and meditate. Shelley, thrilled, asked if he might go with her.

Thus, . . . he found himself sitting . . . at a young girl's side in a graveyard . . . . He felt himself drawn to Mary by an irresistible force. He longed to take her hand, to press his lips to her delicately curved ones, he knew that she desired him, as he did her, and they dared not let their eyes meet. . . . He determined to tell Mary the whole truth about his wife."

While Maurois's Shelley complains about his wife, in Walter Edwin Peck's version, published only 3 years later in a book entitled Shelley: His Life and Work, the complainer is Mary:

"Then, too, [around the 20th of June] occurred, no doubt, some of those meetings now famous in the histories of 'romantic loves' when Mary, 'book in hand' would leave the Skinner Street household to haunt the church-yard of Old St. Pancras, where her mother lay buried; and there would meet Shelley, to whom she would retail her sufferings at the hands of her step-mother . . ."

Just after the second world war, Edmund Blunden, in Shelley: A Life Story, blames Mary Shelley and her education for the turn of events:

"It was not surprising," he asserts, "that the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, hitherto the prisoner of a drastic educational plan, flung herself with glory at the young man who embodied what her mother had wished life to be." He then quotes Godwin's account.

In 1959, though, Eileen Bigland, in her biography of Mary, points the finger at everyone but Mary, including Mary's step-sister, Jane (or Claire) Clairmont:

"Mary and Shelley had fallen deeply, hopelessly in love and, as lovers will, had found a way of meeting secretly. In her efforts to escape the constant friction at home Mary had developed the habit of taking her books each afternoon to her mother's grave in St. Pancras cemetery, where she could study undisturbed. Jane, a born intriguer if ever there was one, led Shelley to this rather gloomy hiding-place and blithely tripped off, leaving the poet with his beloved. In those long hours among the tombstones Mary learned all about the difficulties Shelley had had to contend with since his expulsion from Oxford. As usual, he exaggerated. . . . Mary was very young, terribly alone, unversed in the ways of the world, and passionately in love. It did not occur to her to doubt one word of Shelley's tragic story . . . . By her mother's grave they solemnly plighted their troth . . ."

And the latest word? Only last month, Emily Sunstein published a scrupulously researched book entitled Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality. There she recounts:

"The inevitable occurred on the evening of Sunday, June 26. Mary and Shelley walked to St. Pancras with Jane, who withdrew and left them at Wollstonecraft's grave.

For the first time Shelley confided a history of his private life that at once aroused Mary and left the outcome to her; how his quest for love and understanding had been met with "falsity" and hard, cold hearts from his family, from schoolmates who had persecuted him, from his sweetheart, and most lately his wife, who did not love him and had been unfaithful to him. Now, he intimated, he had found his deliverance in Mary he had no right to it. He tearfully choked back a declaration and stopped speaking. Mary was trembling. In the first great moment of their life together--which he would memorialize in three poems--she spoke "words of peace and pity" and kissed him. Then with quiet candor and resolve she told him that she loved him and was entirely his, for the world's conventions were vulgar superstitions to such as they. . . .Shelley poured out his feelings and they may have made love then and there behind her mother's gravestone."

Clearly, these wildly disparate accounts of the same event demonstrate that no matter what we might like to think about the nature of biographical writing, it is, in fact, highly imaginative writing and always has been. And this is necessarily so, for the task of the biographer is to weave a riveting story from the fabric of the subject's life. It is the use of fictional techniques that makes a biographical subject come alive in the mind of the reader. The biographer who would resist these techniques would, I think, produce a book as dull as the Manhattan phone directory.

These snippets of Shelley biography demonstrate, too, that it is naive to suppose that there could be such a thing as a purely objective account of a life. For the process itself requires the writer to select and edit biographical material. Moreover, telling a good story requires narrating it from some particular vantage point, some perspective on events which must necessarily be subject to bias--both personal and cultural. If we think of biographical writing in terms of the popular metaphor of portrait painting (frequently used to describe it), we can see how a biographical portrait, like a portrait in oils, can still be <u>essentially</u> reliable while at the same time containing

numerous artistic florishes and showing the subject from only one very particular perspective.

We can think of biographical writing in terms of another metaphor, too,--poetic translation. For what is biography but the translation of a lived life into another medium--verbal signs? Just as a good poetic translation involves not a transliteration into another language but an imaginative recreation of the original using the words of a different language and culture, so writing a good biography involves the imaginative recreation of the lived life into language.

How does my training in biography affect the assignments I give my writing students? It has inspired me to make biographical and autobiographical writing assignments designed to help students discover for themselves the subjectivity involved in writing <u>to</u> any particular audience and writing <u>from</u> any particular point of view. I have them use the material of their own lives to discover how the telling of any good story, however factual, requires fictional techniques. For example, I ask students to write an account of their first date for three different audiences--their best friend, their mother, and their minister, scout leader or school principal. Or I ask them to take out their checkbooks and imagine that in some future age they are their own biographers with only the factual information on the check stubbs from which they must puzzle out and construct a life. Writing activities such as these help students better understand not only the impact of point of view and audience on writing but, where the story of a life, even their own life, is concerned, how much fiction is involved in both the living and the telling.